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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM RS
SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA WINS BIG IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS,
INTERNET VOTING TESTED

REF: A. VLADIVOSTOK 116
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Classified By: Acting Political Minister-Counselor David Kostelancik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: October 12 regional elections produced predictably large victories for United Russia in Chechnya, Kemerovo Oblast, Zabaikalskiy Krai and Irkutsk Region (see Ref A for Sakhalin election details). Kemerovo and Chechnya each delivered United Russia tallies over 80 percent; Just Russia won four seats in Chechnya and one token seat in Kemerovo. Leaders of the Communist Party (KPRF), LDPR, and Just Russia all bemoaned irregularities in Chechnya and Kemerovo, while KPRF also criticized electoral procedures in Irkutsk. Voters in Irkutsk and Zabaykalskiy Krai each gave United Russia approximately 50 percent, with the other State Duma parties (Just Russia, LDPR, and KPRF) also winning seats. United Russia also won mayoral races in Vologda and Stavropol. An internet voting experiment in Tula Region marked the first attempt at on-line voting in Russia, although logistical and security concerns remained unanswered. Pundits are now awaiting possible personnel changes, especially among government and party officials associated with United Russia. End Summary.

Chechnya: United Russia Dominant Amid Near-Full Turnout

12. (SBU) Chechnya's 95 percent turnout nearly fulfilled President Ramzan Kadyrov's pre-election promise that "turnout will be at least 100 percent or even more." United Russia dominated the election with 88 percent of the vote, and Just Russia garnered 9 percent, clearing the Republic's legal threshold of 7 percent to seat representatives. The remaining five parties on the ballot failed to win seats in the new unicameral parliament, with the Communists and LDPR capturing only half a percent between them. LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy protested in an October 13 statement that lopsided wins for United Russia in Chechnya and Kemerovo constituted "an accident of Russian democracy." Central Election Commission Chair Vladimir Churov announced October 13 that there were "no serious violations" recorded in any region holding elections.

Kemerovo: United Russia Sweeps, Shenanigans Alleged

13. (SBU) Far outstripping even their own optimistic predictions, United Russia bulldozed the other three parliamentary parties by winning 85 percent of the vote in Kemerovo Oblast. No other party met the 7 percent threshold, with KPRF taking only 3 percent and emerging empty-handed in the region for the first time in its history. Constitutional requirements stipulate that at least two parties must hold seats, however, so Just Russia will receive one token seat despite winning just 5.5 percent of the vote. Turnout

totaled 68 percent of eligible voters.

¶4. (SBU) Both the Communists and Just Russia dismissed the official results in Kemerovo. Just Russia State Duma Deputy Gennadiy Gudkov remarked October 13 that the result in Kemerovo made it "absolutely clear that we have embarked on building a one-party system." KPRF Central Committee member Ivan Melnikov told press October 13 that regional authorities had prevented observers from entering polling stations, and that illegal "arbitrary administrative pressure" during the campaign hamstrung KPRF efforts. KPRF leader Gennadiy Zyuganov announced October 13 his party's intention to contest the Kemerovo results, thus adding to the ongoing legal feud involving KPRF, United Russia, and Kemerovo Governor Aman Tuleyev (Ref C).

Zabaykalskiy Krai: Duma Parties And Agrarians Win Seats

¶5. (SBU) All four State Duma parties passed the threshold to take seats in Zabaykalskiy Krai's regional parliament. As expected (Ref B), United Russia won a majority of the votes with 55 percent; the Communists took second place with 13 percent. LDPR took just under 11 percent and Just Russia 9 percent. The Agrarian Party, with 7 percent, was the only non-parliamentary party to win any seats in any of the five regional elections. However, the Agrarians will merge into United Russia before the end of 2008. Only 45 percent of voters cast ballots.

Irkutsk: Duma Parties Win Seats, Communists Still Protest

¶6. (SBU) More parties won higher percentages of the vote in Irkutsk Region than in any of the other four regions holding elections. In fact, only here did United Russia fail to win a majority of votes, taking "just" 49 percent. LDPR took second place with 15 percent; the Communists took 13 percent; and Just Russia won 8 percent. The Agrarians and the Greens both fell short of the 7 percent barrier, winning 6 and 5 percent, respectively. Despite improving on its 11 percent result in the 2004 regional election, KPRF refused to recognize the Irkutsk results, citing numerous violations by United Russia and by regional authorities. For example, KPRF's Melnikov alleged on October 13 that United Russia conducted an illegal referendum at polling stations in support of the so-called "People's Budget." Just 38 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

Mayoral Elections

¶7. (SBU) Vologda elected United Russia's Yevgeniy Shulepov as its new mayor. Incumbent Stavropol mayor Nikolay Paltsev, also of United Russia, kept his job by winning 75 percent of the vote.

CEC Tests Internet Voting And Electoral Hot-Line

¶8. (SBU) The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) conducted an internet voting experiment on October 12 in conjunction with municipal elections in Novomoskovsk, Tula Region. The on-line votes did not count in the actual election, but rather were counted along with traditional paper ballots to assess accuracy and voter receptiveness to internet voting. Participation in the experiment was voluntary and represented about 10 percent of the entire vote, falling short of the 15 percent that CEC Chairman Churov predicted beforehand would represent a success. Internet voters received a CD-ROM that could be used only once to vote on-line. Representatives from the U.S., Finnish, Estonian, and Kazakh embassies, as well as OSCE/ODIHR officials from Warsaw, observed the internet voting. Although election officials told us that they encountered no technical problems, they could not answer questions regarding the overall integrity of an internet-only election or how to account for CDs that might be lost,

stolen, or sold. Alexander Mashkov, Deputy Chairman of the Tula Region Electoral Commission, added that the experiment was "expensive" and he did not know when internet voting might ever be used to capture actual votes. Indeed, CEC officials in Moscow told us October 12 and 13 that costs and benefits of internet voting would need to be assessed.

¶9. (SBU) CEC International Relations Department Head Aleksey Kudachkin also described for us innovative means for promoting higher voter turnout and the application of uniform voting requirements. For example, Kudachkin touted CEC cooperation with the Public Chamber in creating a special hot-line in Moscow that voters from all regions could call if they had complaints about voting that could not be resolved by local authorities. He said that they hoped to expand their ability to address such complaints before March 2009 regional elections in Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, Karachayev-Cherkess Republic, the Republics of Tatarstan and Khakassia, the Arkhangelsk, Bryansk, Volgograd, and Vladimir Regions, and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

Comment

¶10. (C) The more authoritarian power structures in Chechnya and Kemerovo ensured high turnouts and big United Russia wins. More intriguing are the wider distributions of votes and lower voter turnouts in Irkutsk and Zabaikalskiy Krai, where regional authorities could not deliver overwhelming United Russia victories. Accordingly, two key indicators leading up to the March 2009 regional elections would signal the Kremlin's intention to further consolidate regional power while warning governors that it will not tolerate lackluster get-out-the-vote efforts: (1) the Kremlin sacks or admonishes governors or party leaders in Irkutsk and Zabaikalskiy Krai for their regions' sub-50 percent turnout. United Russia insider Andrey Silantyev told us October 15 this is a distinct possibility; and (2) United Russia infuses fresh blood into the regional parties before its late November congress. Silantyev told us that changes were likely, though they might not be made until just before, or even during, the congress. All final personnel decisions, he said, would be made by United Party leader Vladimir Putin.

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